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Social Dominance Theory

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Without Abstract

Definition

The social dominance theory (SDT) is a multilevel dynamic model aimed at explaining the oppression, discrimination, brutality, and tyranny characterizing human societies as a function of several individual and societal variables.

Description

The SDT has been developed in the 1990s by a group of authors led by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The SDT is not explicitly aimed at explaining individuals' quality of life and subjective well-being. On the contrary, it actually accounts for societies' well-being, in that it is explicitly focused on the prediction of societal oppression, discrimination, brutality, and tyranny. The SDT is rooted in the literature on attitudes to authority, especially the authoritarian personality theory (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), Sidanius' (1976) theory on conservatism, Rokeach's (1979) two-value theory of political behavior, Blumer's (1960) group position theory, Marxist theories, and social identity theory, which considers prejudice and discrimination as the consequence of an intergroup bias aimed at granting individuals with a positive self-esteem (Tajfel, 1987).

According to the SDT's evolutionary approach, each human society, in order to minimize conflicts and intergroup relations, and to maximize wealth and social domination, will group

based hierarchies. As a consequence, individuals' social power, prestige, and privilege will depend, at least in part, on their ascribed membership of specific social categories, mainly those defined by social and demographic characteristics such as age, gender, social class, religious identification, and regional belonging. The degree of societies' social inequalities will depend on a mix of (1) sociodemographic, (2) cultural, (3) institutional, (4) behavioral, and (5) psychological variables.

1. Among the first, a pivotal role is played by male gender: Given that men typically enjoy a higher social status than women, the former tend to favor social stratification more than the latter.
2. The main cultural variables leading to social inequalities are the hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths, i.e., attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies which, giving a moral and intellectual justification to asymmetrical allocations of social resources across social groups, legitimize the hegemony of specific groups over the others. Typical examples of hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths are sexism, ethnic prejudice, political-economic conservatism, protestant ethic, and beliefs in a just world.
3. At the institutional level, the authors focus on aggregated institutional discrimination, i.e., on the sum of the institutions' discriminatory rules, procedures, and actions.
4. The main behavioral variables leading to social hierarchy are aggregated individual discrimination (the sum of the simple and often small acts of individual discrimination by one individual against another) and behavioral asymmetry (mainly asymmetrical in-group bias, leading dominant groups to display higher levels of in-group favoritism than subordinate groups).
5. Among the psychological variables that promote social inequalities, the main role is played by social dominance orientation (SDO), the most crucial and developed construct in the SDT. SDO is "the degree to which individuals desire and support group-based hierarchy and the domination of 'inferior' groups by 'superior' groups, regardless of their own position in the social hierarchy" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 61). Hence, SDO is the motivated tendency to pursue and to agree with socially advantaged groups' dominance over socially disadvantaged groups, e.g., men's dominance over women, white people's dominance over black people, and rich people's dominance over the poor. In the original version of the theory, SDO is considered as a stable personality variable, strongly correlated with beliefs fostering group-based inequalities, and thus with support of law and order policies, military expenditure, capital punishment, racial policies, and with opposition towards affirmative actions and minorities' rights. In this light, according to Altemeyer (1998), together with right wing authoritarianism, SDO should be considered as one of the two main psychological roots of generalized prejudice.

In the SDT, not much is said about the origins of SDO. Indeed, according to Sidanius and Pratto (1999), SDO can be explained as the consequence of three sets of variables: (a) belonging to, and identification with, socially dominant groups; (b) variables linked to the socialization process, such as educational status, social status, and religious faith; and (c) some (not discussed) innate personality traits.

More recently, Sidanius and Pratto's conception of SDO and its origins has been radically questioned. First, strong SDO differences emerged among people belonging to the same (dis)advantaged groups (for instance, among men, very high and very low SDO scorers can be both detected). This evidence weakens the claim that people belonging to the same socially dominant group, being interested in maintaining their dominance, should share the same psychological tendency to foster social hierarchy (Huddy, 2004).

Second, research has shown that SDO changes as a function of contextual influences, mainly as a consequence of realistic threat, i.e., perceiving that one or more out-groups can jeopardize the in-groups' social status. Indeed, it has been shown that SDO depends, at least in part, on the portion of the social identity that is salient for the individuals in their "here and now." For instance, Huang and Liu (2005) showed that men actually score higher than women on SDO only if gender is experimentally made salient.

Third, Morrison and Ybarra (2009), in a US sample of Republicans and Democrats, showed that the threat to in-group values led to a significant SDO polarization: SDO increased among Republicans, a group in favor of social hierarchies, and decreased among Democrats (a group which does not tolerate them).

Fourth, Lehmiller and Schmitt (2007) experimentally showed that even the association between SDO and the variables that should correlate with the construct (e.g., prejudice, militarism, just world beliefs, support for capital punishment, and so on) is not invariant; on the contrary, it depends on the context. For example, SDO positively correlated with support for war if the war in Iraq was primed, whereas it did not if Saddam Hussein's dominance in Iraq was primed. This result drastically weakens the SDT claim that SDO should be considered as the stable psychological basis for dominance.

Discussion

At present, the literature is mainly focused on the psychological pivot of the SDT, i.e., SDO. Unfortunately, the theorization and research on the links between the sociodemographic, cultural, institutional, behavioral, and psychological variables leading to societal discrimination, oppression, brutality, and tyranny, deserve further developments. As a whole, SDO, more than a stable personality variable, should be considered as a broad ideological orientation which depends on: (a) the portion of the social identity that comes in mind when people think about the relationships between specific groups, and (b) the actual relationships

between the in-groups and the out-groups. This is consistent with Duckitt's (2001) model, according to which SDO is an ideological variable which depends on a competitive-dominance-driven motivation for dominance, superiority, and power over out-groups, which in turn is negatively influenced by personality (in the first version of the model by tough-mindedness and in the second one by the agreeableness dimension of the five factors model of personality). Being based on the tendency to see the world as a social Darwinist competitive jungle governed by the rules of the "zero sum" games, SDO, more than predicting generalized prejudice, was shown to predict prejudice towards groups perceived as subordinated and as threatening social hierarchy, i.e., towards derogated groups (e.g., physically unattractive people, obese and unemployed people) and dissident groups (e.g., protestors, atheists, and gay right activists) (Asbrock, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2010). Consistently, Duckitt and Sibley (2009) experimentally showed that SDO predicts prejudice towards a fictitious immigrant group when this group was presented as relatively disadvantaged or as competent and economically competitive, but not when it was presented as morally deviant. In conclusion, SDO efficiently predicts prejudice toward strategically devaluated groups, and – consistently with the claims of the SDT – such prejudice has plausibly the function of maintaining and justifying social hierarchy, intergroup dominance, and oppression of dominant groups over subordinated groups.

Cross-References

Belief in a Just World (BJW)

Five Factor Model of Personality

Prejudice

Social Inequalities

Social Stratification

Subjective Well-being

System-Justifying Ideologies

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